



## **2004 DNR ACCESSIBILITY SURVEY PROJECT**

**MARYLAND STATE FOREST AND PARK SERVICE &  
THE OFFICE OF FAIR PRACTICES**

**January 25, 2005**

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## **I. Executive Summary**

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is committed to the goal of “accessibility for all” and therefore commissioned this research project to evaluate the level of satisfaction that park users with mobility impairments feel in regards to current DNR accessibility efforts.

The Accessibility Survey Project was conducted from June through December 2004. The goal of this project was to gain a greater understanding of how well DNR is meeting the needs and concerns of park users with mobility impairments. Self-administered surveys were mailed to 299 randomly selected Maryland Access Pass holders. We received a 22% return rate of completed surveys, which is an average return rate for mail surveys. Of those respondents who returned completed surveys, 61% indicated that they wanted to further discuss their opinions and concerns about accessibility in the Maryland State Parks, indicating that this user group has specific ideas about how the parks that they use can be made more accessible for them and they desire to share that information with the people who can make those changes. In addition to the mail survey, several informal interviews were conducted with park users who self-identified as having a mobility impairment. The findings from the survey and the interviews were discussed more in-depth with a discussion group from the DNR Advisory Council on Disability Issues.

The survey project was co-sponsored by the Maryland DNR Office of Fair Practices (OFP) and the State Forest and Park Service, with the support of the DNR Advisory Council on Disability Issues. The project leader and primary researcher was the OFP Graduate Intern, Dianne Beer, Master of Applied Anthropology Graduate Candidate at the University of Maryland whose foci are tourism, recreation, leisure and disability.

While segments of the survey results indicate approximately a 75% satisfaction level with current accessibility efforts, it is also important to consider the context of the raw numbers from the survey. Other information gathered throughout the project (via ethnographic methods) indicates the need for improved efforts in future accessibility plans and programs. There are several recommendations that have emerged from the accessibility survey project to help guide the Maryland DNR in its goal of achieving “accessibility for all”. The intent is to produce some recommendations that are achievable and immediate and some that may be more challenging and long-term.

These initial recommendations are geared more toward manageable agency reform that can be used to send an important message to park users with disabilities; that accessibility is a priority to this agency.

- DNR should establish stronger channels of communication and feedback for users with disabilities. This will allow the comparison of the DNRs accessibility plans with the actual needs of the users. This should also include involving and inviting park users with disabilities to participate in accessibility projects in local areas/regions (since nobody knows what features and services they need better than they do).

- The experience, advice, and resources of the Advisory Council should be utilized in a more active way. An example that emerged in the focused group discussion included asking members of the Council to help begin the process of improving accessibility by participating in the initial step of collecting an inventory of information on all of the accessible features and services available at each park. This inventory would be dated, posted, and updated as necessary and would promote awareness of what is currently available, in terms of accessibility.
- It became evident throughout the research project that the source of negative experiences in the parks was not from lack of accessible features but rather from interactions with park employees who were not always sensitive to the accommodations necessary for park users with mobility impairments (particularly those whose disabilities are not overtly visible). Therefore, more intensive training at all levels of park and agency employees (volunteer, seasonal, NR police, park staff, park managers, etc.) in diversity and specifically in regards to disability accommodation and sensitivity is recommended.

While agency reform is an important step in improving the commitment to accessibility, there also needs to be a continued dedication to feasible physical adaptations in the long-term, such as:

- Bathrooms closer to activity areas.
- More reserved accessible parking in better locations.
- More alternatives within the parks for varying levels of ability.
- More distinct labeling on specifically accessible features for the benefit of park users with disabilities and to potentially serve as an educational opportunity for non-disabled park visitors.

Equally important, Maryland DNR needs to invest in further research into improving accessibility in the various areas of the DNR. Future studies should look at park users with different types of disabilities, such as blind, deaf and hard of hearing, and mentally disabled. Future research could even be extended to include caregivers and family members of park users with disabilities.

The Accessibility Survey Project was an important step for the DNR in moving closer to their goal of improved accessibility. I recommend that the DNR share the findings of this research project with the public to demonstrate their commitment to “accessibility for all”.

*I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to those individuals who participated in this project by completing the survey, volunteering for interviews, allowing me to observe you in the parks, and to all those who supported this project in their own ways. Thank you for your support and commitment to improved accessibility in the Maryland State Parks.*